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REPORT
The London Taxi Company



ALL HAIL —Global

Preface
The iconic London black cab is being adopted across the world, from Azerbaijan to Italy. It's been painted purple and made into a high-class ride with wi-fi and a drinks cabinet, and it all started with The London Taxi Company, which Monocle visits in Coventry.

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Hey!

A line of black cabs waits outside a railway station, amber lights glowing. A passenger approaches, laden with luggage. It's a scene synonymous with London – the famous black taxi and cabbie, armed with his legendary “Knowledge” of short-cuts and attractions.

But this is actually Coventry, almost 100 miles northwest of the British capital. And, remarkably, it could just as easily be Baku, or Riyadh. The London taxi has gone global.

Coventry is prouder than most of its black cab network however. As well it should be; the London taxi has been built at an unassuming factory just outside the city centre since 1948. “Because of its connections with London, people expect it to be manufactured just down the road from Buckingham Palace or something,”



chuckles John Russell, CEO of Manganese Bronze, the British holding group that owns The London Taxi Company (LTC). “But this symbol of Britain comes from a traditional engineering area,” he says, gesticulating towards the factory floor.

Of course, there have always been stories of the rich and famous outlandishly shipping out a London taxi to play with. King George Tupou V of Tonga has one complete with curtains, because, it's said, he finds cabs easier to enter and leave when wearing a ceremonial uniform and sword. A Middle Eastern sheikh spent thousands of dollars adorning his with leather and gold – LTCs International Market Development director Matthew Cheyne is far too circumspect to reveal his name. And Britain's royal consort, Prince Philip has

his own too. The distinctiveness of the black cab brand has made it an incredibly appealing proposition for countries where there is no taxi service, or at least a very poor, unregulated one as in Azerbaijan.

“The shape certainly helps,” says Cheyne. “It's recognisable, which really works if you're a customer on the pavement. Instantly, if a black cab approaches with its light on, you know what it is and what it stands for.”

When MONOCLE visited Coventry, it was pointed out more than once that the LTC is the largest wholly British-owned car manufacturer today, producing around 2,700 vehicles a year. It's an interesting, if slightly overstated point – the taxis for the world market are wholly constructed in Shanghai and even the

OI
Baku
Azerbaijan

As part of a major upgrade of the public transportation network across the Azerbaijani capital, the Baki Taxisi company commissioned 100 vehicles from LTC, operating from 11 taxi ranks and painted in a rather garish purple. Perhaps it was the large-scale training programme the drivers undertook under the guiding hand of the London Taxi Company, or maybe it was the presence of a meter – traditionally private cabs in Baku have never concerned

themselves too much with standard pricing – but it soon became clear that 100 wasn't enough. Another 200 were quickly dispatched, and by the end of 2011 there should be 1,000 London taxis on the streets of Baku. By way of comparison, in the first nine months of this year LTC's entire UK operation – the traditional heartland of its sales – only sold 1,174 vehicles.

O2
Malta

The yellow cab, like the black taxi in London, is visual shorthand for New York City. Clearly for Dial-a-Cab in Malta one icon wasn't enough, so it combined the bold yellow of the American vehicles with the distinctive shape of the London one. Earlier this year, Dial-a-Cab launched a fleet of bright yellow London Taxis as a 24/7 chauffeur-driven service. There's wi-fi, the drivers speak English and the service seems to be popular with locals and tourists. It's even pitching them as mobile meeting rooms for business people.



O3
Rome/Milan
Italy

Matthew Cheyne, the international market development director for London Taxi Company, admits that the hardest markets to break into have been the European countries with strong car manufacturing traditions. French, German and Italian taxi drivers are creatures of habit, it seems, preferring to transport their passengers in Renaults, Mercedes or Fiats – even though, of course, they're not actually purpose-built taxis. In June, however, Hybrid UK

Garages launched the London Taxi Service in Rome and Milan, with a 50-strong fleet that marketed itself as “a premium taxi service delivering exceptional quality as standard”. Painted an eye-catching white, the firm hopes that it will redeem the abysmal track record of Italy's taxis – recently voted amongst the worst in the world.

O4
Beirut
Lebanon

“Black” cabs came to Beirut as an array of brightly coloured London Taxis ordered by National New Dawn (NND). The NND modified the interiors to include a leather table, flat-screen television and drinks cabinet – this was less a taxi and more a bridal car for its off-shoot London Wedding Service. And on the days when there's no blushing bride, the taxi doubles up as a vehicle to tour the country. The forward-thinking company is also well ahead of the UK – its vehicles come equipped with wi-fi.



UK taxis are essentially manufactured in kit form there and shipped over to Coventry for final assembly by hand.

A London taxi is far more than a beetle black shell of course. The LTC also offers training for drivers, and a consultancy service for taxi companies, aiming to help instil the kind of service that a customer might expect when they hail a cab on Oxford Street in London.

“The reason the London Taxi service is seen as the best in the world has come from legislation and regulations that govern what a driver can do and how they perform,” adds Cheyne. “That goes right back to Oliver Cromwell licensing a Hackney Carriage in the 1660s. We take a simplified version of that around the world, based around customer service, driving techniques, cleanliness and local knowledge. And that means we're helping transform taxi driving from a job that's often a last resort, into a career. In Baku, we had to change the London Taxi Company badge on the vehicle to Baki Taxisi, but all the drivers kept the original because they were so proud to be a London taxi driver. That's what we do.”

“Anything that's described as iconic starts out as being something that was fundamentally good at what it does,” confirms Russell. “Our vehicle has proved that. Combine that with what a good driver brings and the sociability of the space – where five people can sit facing each other – and a drab journey is changed into a good experience.” — (M)

O5
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia

In Riyadh the black cab is marketed as a high class, premium transport service run under the auspices of the London Cab Club. Joining the club enrolls you in a loyalty scheme where points can be redeemed in high-end restaurants and shops, and thus far it's been a remarkable success; the Four Seasons in Riyadh has taxis of every colour outside, and the vehicles are often chosen over a BMW or Mercedes saloon by guests. There are now over 100 London taxis in Riyadh.

